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SUBJECT: Child Abduction Case Strains Norwegian - Moroccan Relations

¶1. Summary: Scrutiny of the Norwegian MFA and MoD involvement in a high profile Norwegian - Moroccan child custody case has increased dramatically following the revelation by Norwegian centrist newspaper Verdens Gang (VG) January 30 that off-duty Norwegian Special Forces had assisted the mother in bringing her children from Morocco to Norway, without the consent of the children's father. Questions have been raised as to how much the Norwegian government knew about the operation, with the Norwegian Minister of Defense Grete Faremo and Chief of Defense Harald Sunde stating February 1 that Special Forces involvement was unacceptable and under investigation. Moroccan Minister of Foreign Affairs Taieb Fassi Fihri said February 3 that he holds the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs responsible for the incident. The case has made headlines news in both Norway and Morocco, but while unlikely to have major ramifications for the Norwegian-Moroccan relationship it has raised questions in the media regarding Norwegian military networks acting outside of MoD authority. End Summary.

#### Off-Duty Special Forces Involved in Child Abduction

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¶2. Norwegian mother Anne Cecilie Hopstock and Norwegian father, the Moroccan born former Olympic champion Khalid Skah, entered into a custody battle for their two children after they failed to return to Norway after visiting their father in Morocco in 2007. In 2008 a Norwegian court gave custody of the two children to Hopstock while a Moroccan court gave custody to Skah. The two children fled from Skah's residence July 19, 2009 and sought refuge in the Norwegian embassy in Rabat. After three days they were driven by Norwegian Police Attach???? Stein Haugen from the embassy to a place where the two children changed cars and were taken to a boat dock, where the Norwegian mother and off-duty Norwegian special forces picked up the children and sailed to Spain and onwards to Norway.

¶3. While the press picked up on the "Skah Case" last summer, it came back into the spotlight again January 30 after VG ran a story revealing the involvement of off-duty Norwegian special forces, speculating that the that Norwegian authorities knew of the plans to bring the children back to Norway. Norwegian Ministry of Defense Grete Faremo convened a press conference February 1 to deny MoD involvement, saying that the Special Forces had acted on their own initiative without MoD approval and were now being investigated. In the same press conference Norwegian Minister of Foreign Affairs Jonas Gahr Stoere denied the Norwegian government knew of the plans to transport the children out of Morocco. However, Stoere said that he would investigate the media allegations.

¶4. The two children told Norwegian independent television channel TV2 February 2 that they had feared for their lives in Morocco and did not want to return. Skah invited Norwegian media to a press conference February 4 in Rabat where he stated that he wishes to seek a solution in cooperation with Norwegian authorities. Furthermore, Skah said he had information that that would turn the case into a "Norwegian Watergate." When asked to produce such evidence he declined, saying he had subsequently been advised against it. Norwegian Chargé d'affaires in Morocco Embassy Hans Fredrik Lehne stated February 5 that he had received a number of threats from Khalid Skah and his relatives, including a threat to fire-bomb the embassy.

Reactions critical in Rabat - modest in Oslo

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¶5. Morocco's Foreign Minister Taieb Fassi Fihri stated February 3

OSLO 00000082 002 OF 002

in Rabat that Skah's children were kidnapped and that Norway had disregarded Moroccan laws. He noted that the children are also Moroccan citizens and that their father had custody of the children under Moroccan law. The Moroccan Ambassador to Norway Yahdih Bouchaab told independent online newspaper Nettavisen February 2 that given the Norwegian Police Attaché's involvement in the case violates international law. Bouchaab also said that he had provided several documents on the case to the Norwegian MFA last fall, and received no response.

¶6. Most Norwegian experts on law and diplomacy agree that the case will soon blow over with negligible impact on the Norwegian - Moroccan bilateral relationship. Research Director at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI) Ivar Neumann perceived the media reactions to be out of proportion, stating that a number of similar cases go unreported, and the attention was due to the Special Forces involvement and Khalid Skah's status a former Olympic Champion. Political reactions from the opposition have been fairly modest, asking that the case be debated in Parliament and that military officers not be used as scapegoats. Additional fall-out from the Skah case includes speculation in the media about certain segments of Norway's military, such as the Special Forces, acting as an independent network and taking assignments outside of their military duties.

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